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ABSTRACT

The gap between Generation X and earlier generations represents much more than age and technological differences. It reflects the effects of a changing society on a generation. Social changes such as the increase in single-parent households and households with both parents working, corporate downsizing and layoffs, limited opportunities for career positions, and economic troubles at the society level have combined to create a generation characterized as follows: independent problem solvers and self-starters; technologically literate; responsive; focused; lifelong learners; ambitious; and fearless. Effective instruction requires that teachers target their teaching toward the unique characteristics of today's learners. The following are some suggestions for targeting instruction toward the characteristics identified with Generation X: focus on outcomes rather than techniques; engage students in role playing and cooperative learning experiences; give students control over their own learning; respect learner's ability to engage in parallel thinking; give attention to the format of instructional materials; and engage students in creating their own learning environments and in completing projects that demand new skills and application of existing skills to new situations. (MN)

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DIGEST NO. 184

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by Bettina Lankard Brown

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New Learning Strategies for Generation X

Generation X workers resent the labels that have been used to describe them: slackers, arrogant, disloyal, having short attention spans. In fact, these descriptions are less likely to reflect the behaviors of individuals in Generation X than the perceptions of managers who are not attuned to new ways of learning. This *Digest* investigates ways in which the learning characteristics of the young adults classified as Generation X reflect the need for the new teaching and learning strategies promoted by cognitive scientists, such as learning in context, cooperative learning, and real-world application of knowledge.

The Life Experience Gap

The gap between Generation X and earlier generations represents much more than age and technological differences. It reflects the effects of a changing society on a generation. Young adults born between 1961 and 1981 have radically different life experiences than those in generations before them.

In their youth, many Generation Xers were "latchkey kids"—children who saw both of their parents working and/or furthering their education. Many of them were raised in single parent homes, the children of divorced parents. They grew up with "fast" food; "remote control" entertainment; and "quick response" devices such as automatic teller machines and microwave ovens, all of which provided instant gratification.

As young adults, Generation Xers find themselves facing limited economic prospects and a society different from any preceeding them. The previous generation saw rapid economic growth and expanding opportunities. Generation Xers see corporate downsizing and layoffs, limited opportunities for career positions, and an economically troubled society with soaring national debt and a bankrupt social security system (Hornblower 1997). Although these life experiences are not exclusive to the "X" Generation (nor are they common to all persons in this age group), they *are* reflective the current state of society and have implications for the way people learn.

Ways of Learning

Life experiences shape the way people learn. The following characteristics, which have been attributed to Generation Xers, offer insight into new ways of learning and highlight the need for new approaches to teaching:

- Having grown up with both parents working/furthering their education, Xers are used to getting things done on their own. Hence, they tend to be *independent problem solvers and self-starters*. They want support and feedback, but they don't want to be controlled.
- Because many of them grew up with computers, Generation Xers are *technologically literate*. They are familiar with computer technology and prefer the quick access of Internet, CD-ROMs, and the World Wide Web as their sources for locating information.
- Conditioned to expect immediate gratification, Generation Xers are *responsive*. They crave stimulation and expect immediate answers and feedback.
- Skeptical of society and its institutions, Generation Xers are *focused*. As learners, they don't want to waste time doing quantities of school work; they want their work to be meaningful to them. "They want to know why they must learn something before they take time to learn how" (Caudron 1997, p. 22).
- Knowing that they must keep learning to be marketable, Generation Xers are *lifelong learners*. They do not expect to grow old working for the same company, so they view their job environments as places to grow. They seek continuing education and training opportunities; if they don't get them, they seek new jobs where they can.
- Craving success on their own terms, Generation Xers are *ambitious*. They are "flocking to technology start-ups, founding small businesses and even taking up causes—all in their own way" (Hornblower 1997, p. 58).
- As illustrated by their involvement in extreme sports such as bungee jumping and sky surfing, Generation Xers are *fearless*. "Indeed, adversity, far from discouraging youths, has given them a harder, even ruthless edge. Most believe 'I have to take what I can get in this world because no one is going to give me anything.'" (ibid., p. 62.).

New Teaching Strategies

Teachers must be alert to the need for continual updating of their teaching skills and practices. Wagschal (1997) reports: "I'm not sure when it happened. I was no longer a contemporary of my students. The adults kept coming. Their ages stayed about the same, but I kept getting older. . . . Who would have dreamed that it was no longer appropriate to ask a 30-year-old adult learner what they were doing when John F. Kennedy was assassinated?" (p. 21).

Effective instruction requires the teacher to step outside the realm of personal experiences into the world of the learner. It is the learner who must be engaged for learning to occur, the learner who must make the commitment to learn. Newmann et al. (1995) point out that for learning to be meaningful (authentic), it must be individually constructed. "Learning takes place as students process, interpret, and negotiate the meaning of new information. This is heavily influenced by the student's prior knowledge, and by the values, expectations, rewards and sanctions that shape the learning environment" (p. 2). Authentic learning requires the learner to communicate an in-depth understanding of a problem or issue rather than memorize sets of isolated facts, and it must result in achievements that have relevance beyond school. Caudron (1997)

offers the following suggestions for targeting instruction to individuals with learning characteristics such as those identified with Generation X:

Focus on Outcomes Rather than Techniques

Help students put information to work—to *do* something, not only *know* something. The training director of the Olive Garden restaurants placed the restaurants' server trainees in the role of tour guides for the menu. Rather than memorizing the ingredients of the dishes on the menu, the trainees had to practice telling customers about each dish in appealing terms. In that way, the trainees "not only know why they are learning the ingredients, but they also know how to put the information to work" (ibid., p. 22).

Make Learning Experiential

Engage students in role playing and cooperative learning experiences. Knowing how to work cooperatively with others, to build on the knowledge and experiences of diverse people who bring different perspective to the thinking and reasoning process, can help students to expand their thinking and explore new approaches to learning.

Give Students Control over Their Own Learning

Provide students a range of options, not only in terms of learning content and process, but also in terms of class/training times and locations. The new learners do not want to be pigeonholed. They require autonomy and flexibility for their own learning. They demand a variety of instructional methods from which they can choose to learn, e.g., videotapes, self-paced modules, interactive CDs.

Respect Learners' Ability to Engage in Parallel Thinking

Remember that Generation Xers grew up on computers. They have used the mouse to jump around and explore new areas of information. As a result, they have the ability to assimilate information quickly and to focus on multiple ideas at once. Design education and training materials to include a variety of ways to present information at once, for example, include charts, photos, text, graphics, and cartoons on a single page" (ibid.).

Highlight Key Points

Give attention to the format of instructional materials. The new learners are surfers and scanners rather than readers and viewers. They are prone to move quickly from one point to another. They want to gather pertinent information as quickly as possible and move on. "After all, they did grow up on MTV, computer games, and digital information while we grew up with pulp" (Wagschal 1997, p. 25).

Motivate Learning

Engage students in creating their own learning environments. Give them a role in establishing learning goals, high intellectual standards, and evaluation criteria. By transferring classroom rules and management to students for their direction, teachers become facilitators of learning, enabling students to determine the strategies that will motivate them to learn.

Provide Challenges

Engage learners in projects that demand new skills and the application of existing skills to new situations. Challenge them to construct knowledge from their experiences by connecting school learning to worksite applications.

Summary

The term "Generation X" is a label. It was contrived by the media and it carries all the germs of propaganda and stereotype (Brinkley 1994). However, for discussion purposes, the term "Generation X" is useful in that it serves as a descriptor of a generation that has emerged from a radically changed, postmodern society and that is being educated by people from a previous generation who were reared under the tenets of the modern age (Sachs 1996). The cultural gap between generations reflects the diverse life experiences of the individuals in those generations. By targeting teaching to the unique characteristics of today's learners—characteristics that reflect their life experiences, educators and trainers will promote learning that has application in school, work, and community settings. Today, many firms have taken the initiative to make such changes in their training programs. These programs "recognize quality of life needs, promote innovative thinking, and provide skills enhancement, among other progressive workplace approaches" ("Your Life" 1997, p. 6).

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